

# Teaching Information Literacy Using the Short Story

David J. Brier and Vickery Kaye Lebbin

## The authors:

David J. Brier is a Systems Librarian and Vickery Kaye Lebbin is a Social Sciences Librarian both at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Hawaii, USA.

## Abstract:

Stories are powerful teaching tools because of their potential to stimulate the imagination of students and engage them with the material. The short story gives meaning to abstract concepts, aids memory, makes learning fun, and is time efficient. This article explains the approach to teaching information literacy through the use of short stories, including how to create vivid connections to the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. Provides course instructors with examples of how the short story can be used as a platform to discuss information literacy standards.

## Introduction

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and  
measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much  
applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

—Walt Whitman, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”

In “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” Walt Whitman invites us to consider the ways that preoccupation with technical information can sometimes stifle understanding, meaning, and deeper connections. Put another way, overemphasis on facts and methodological processes can rob us of the magic in the world. Whitman provides us with a starting point for our discussion on the use of literature, specifically, the use of short stories, as a tool to help teach information literacy.

Although the use of stories is common in many academic endeavors, a scan of the professional literature and information literacy exercises offered at academic

libraries suggests that few, if any, teachers are using stories to introduce, explain, and expand upon the deeper, conceptual, and lifelong goals of information literacy. All too often, information literacy emphasizes the technical aspects of finding, evaluating, and using information at the expense of helping students discover the meaning and purpose of being information literate. The primary contention of this article is that stories offer both students and teachers a fresh approach and powerful educational resource to illustrate information literacy competency and to connect learning to information literacy standards.

## **Theoretical Framework**

At this point there are two basic questions we must ask ourselves. Why should we use stories to understand information literacy standards? What are the basic motivations of students? In the following section, we would like to illustrate several of these reasons and motivations.

Drawing from Daniel Roselle's *Transformations II: Understanding American History Through Science Fiction*, stories can be used to:

1. Stimulate the imagination of students.
2. Increase the recognition of the persistent problems that people face.
3. Develop the ability to see relationships.
4. Facilitate the student's task of understanding.
5. Provide bases for analyses of key issues.
6. Serve as strong incentives for additional research and study.

7. Add immeasurably to the student's enjoyment of social studies.  
(Roselle, 1974, p. 9).

This list works just as well for teaching information literacy competency standards. Adding to and adapting Roselle's list for information literacy instruction, the use of stories enables students and teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the following:

1. The benefits of information literacy.
2. The hazards and consequences of information illiteracy.
3. The reasons for becoming information literate.
4. The desire to build and sustain information literacy skills over a lifetime.

Stories help us to learn what is valuable and to unlearn what is not.

A good deal of information literacy instruction involves helping students unlearn poor habits of mind. It is easier for a student to embrace a new idea than to kick an old habit. Through the thoughts and actions of story characters, information literacy and illiteracy can be explored. Additionally, stories have four compelling characteristics that make them successful mediums to teach information literacy standards: meaning, memory, fun, and efficiency.

### **Stories Provide Meaning**

Stories respond to the universal need for meaning. One of the most important tasks in delivering any type of academic instruction is helping students find meaning somewhere between the assignments and the assessments. It is well known

that many students have lost the desire to learn for the sake of learning. Many believe the purpose of higher education is to train them for a job. From this perspective, information literacy is a waste of time because it does not contribute to this goal. Indeed, for many, information literacy is just another annoying and useless hurdle to jump before graduating. After all, how often does one need to find, understand, evaluate, and use three literary criticisms of *Beowulf* in peer-reviewed academic journals or evaluate both print and non-print sources in one's bibliography after graduating? To combat these vocational reasons for education, we need to provide students with alternative reasons, rather than methods, for learning in general and information literacy competency standards in particular.

A review of information literacy exercises assigned in academic libraries suggests a major emphasis on technical skills such as the introduction to key databases, the principles of online searching, familiarity with different classification systems and information formats, the mechanics of citing resources, and acquainting students with copyright and plagiarism. While all of these activities are important, they are uninspiring and fail to give meaning and clarity to information literacy. Technical understanding is not enough. Often, there is an abyss between mechanical know-how and information literacy leaving students without the conceptual and ethical resources to understand information. Storytelling is a way to bridge this gap and provide images of information literacy used for personal, social, and global purposes.

Because meaning doesn't simply leap from the pages of any story, the teacher must work with students to produce it. As Caine and Caine put it,

Because the learner is constantly searching for connections on many levels, educators need to *orchestrate the experiences* from which learners extract understanding. They must do more than simply provide information or force the memorization of isolated facts and skills. (1991, p. 5).

Simmons echoes this point when writing

A good story helps you influence the interpretation people give to facts. Facts aren't influential until they *mean* something to someone. A story delivers a context so that your facts slide into new slots in your listeners' brains. (2001, p. 51)

Our central point, we do not use stories to show *how* to become information literature but *why*. We use stories to provide students with a variety of reasons about why they should become lifelong learners.

### **Stories Aid Memory**

Stories are sticky. To put it simply, a good story is easy to remember. Indeed, a good story can last a lifetime. They provide us with a tool to combat the short-term learning formula found in many of today's assessment dominated classrooms: do the work, take the test, get the grade, forget the work. This sentiment is expressed by Caine and Caine,

Stories and myths help tie content together and aid natural memory...Stories are powerful because they "bind" information and understanding over time.

In fact, there is strong reason to believe that the organization of information in story form is a natural brain process. (1991, p. 113).

Like an infectious song, they wrap themselves around our minds. Rather than simply filling students with discrete and arcane bits of knowledge and skills easily forgotten, stories can be recalled long after the course.

### **Stories Make Learning Fun**

Stories are fun. As education and entertainment merge, the urge to find interesting and attention getting tools for learning is an important determinant in pedagogical success. Kurt Cobain, the former lead singer and songwriter of the grunge rock band *Nirvana*, expressed the expectations of today's youth well in the song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" when singing "Here we are now, Entertain us!"

Whether we like it or not, many students come to class "having learned that learning is a form of entertainment or, more precisely, that anything worth learning can take the form of entertainment." (Postman, 1985, p. 154). While we are not advocating *funderstanding* or full-scale *edutainment*, we are trying to find a middle ground that is interesting, playful, and substantive. Because many students find stories inherently fun, they offer us a tool to meet several of our goals without resorting to mere amusement.

### **Stories are Time Efficient**

One important element of the short story's utility is efficiency. For students, the short story's brief length means they are more likely to complete the reading. In a society where students face increasing demands on their time, efficiently

completing assignments is attractive. Because short stories require less time to discover themes than literary alternatives such as the novel, they offer an optimum method for introducing and exploring a large number of information literacy standards. For instructors, short stories are compatible with a variety of instruction settings, from one-shot sessions to semester-long courses. With the one-shot sessions it is more realistic to assign a short story to students than a novel. For a semester-long course a collection of short stories can be assigned.

While the short story differs from the novel in length, there is no definitive minimum or maximum word count. Howe and Howe define the typical short story falling between 3,000 to 8,000 words (1982, p. x). In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the entry for ‘short story’ includes a description from Edgar Allan Poe, often referred to as the originator of the short story as an established genre. Poe identifies the short story “...as a narrative which can be read at one sitting of from half an hour to two hours...” This entry in the *Glossary* continues by explaining that the term, short story, “...covers a great diversity of prose fiction, all the way from the short short story...to such long and complex forms as Herman Melville’s Billy Budd...” (Abrams, 1993, p. 194).

It is the sub-category “short short story” we found most effective and relied on for our selections. This sub-category of short stories has various labels, such as micro stories, sudden fiction, flash fiction, and more.

So far in this paper, emphasis has been placed on the reasons to use short stories in teaching information literacy and the motivations students have to use stories. At this juncture, it is useful to discuss the methodology to locate short stories, the

implementation into the instruction process, and the framing of questions and connection to information literacy standards.

## **Methodology**

There are several methods to locate short stories requiring varying amounts of effort. The first is to read periodicals that contain short stories, such as, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Yorker*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and so on. This approach of course requires access to these various publications and can be cumbersome. A second method is to use an index tool, such as the *Short Story Index*. One complication with this approach is deciding what subject term to look under. While each story will be linked to the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* the subject of the story could be almost anything; vampires, theft, cookery, the possibilities are limitless. A third method is to review anthologies of short stories. A benefit of this approach is someone has done the work compiling a group of stories that meet some criteria (length, genre, theme). This can also be a weakness since you may be limited by the criteria. A fourth method is reader advisory or simply asking experts and avid story readers for recommendations. The difficulty with this method is articulating the story theme. A fifth method is to search Internet sites that contain selections of short stories. The difficulty here is similar to searching an index tool, a struggle in the selection of search terms. Whichever search method or combination of methods is selected many stories will need to be read.



The primary method we have utilized is the reviewing of anthologies. Since we are interested in collecting short short stories, anthologies centering on length have proved valuable.

## **Implementation**

### **Linking to Standards**

Once a story is selected it needs to be linked to the appropriate standard, indicator, or outcome from the *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. We have linked our stories at the outcome level. To demonstrate, included here are five stories linked at the outcome level for each of the standards—knowing, accessing, evaluating, using, and ethical/legal use of information.

Following each story synopsis is the specific linked outcome.

“The Happiest Day of Your Life” by Bob Shaw presents a mother’s apprehension to her 8-year old son’s one and only day of school. Part of a privileged group, her boy is implanted in two hours with formal knowledge that typically requires ten years to learn. Although the rest of the family is enthusiastic about the process, the mother feels something is lost. This story encourages discussion on developing a realistic overall plan and timeline to acquire needed information; suggesting that the learning process can be rewarding and lead to unanticipated discoveries. (Standard 1, Indicator 3, Outcome c = Defines a realistic overall plan and timeline to acquire the needed information)

“Wrong Channel” by Roberto Fernandez is a quick story of a Cuban woman’s medical examination for a green card. Since the woman does not speak English, her friend accompanies her as an interpreter. An amusing dialog ensues between the

doctor and two women over misuse of the term TV (television) for TB (tuberculosis). This story can stimulate discussion on assessing the quality of one's information seeking results to determine if different searching methods should be used. (Standard 2, Indicator 4, Outcome a = Assess the quantity, quality, and relevance of the search results to determine whether alternative information retrieval systems or investigative methods should be utilized)

“Grief” is a 271-word story by Ron Carlson about a Queen who dies suddenly following her husband, the King's death. The cause of her death is labeled “grief”. The narrator however, recounts a night of drinking and laughing that led to a piece of improperly chewed fruit. “Grief” though is more appropriate, necessary, and now the official explanation in history. This story can lead to discussion on accuracy and the encouragement of questioning sources of information. (Standard 3, Indicator 4, Outcome e = Determines probable accuracy by questioning the source of the data, the limitations of the information gathering tools or strategies, and the reasonableness of the conclusions)

“The Voice from the Curious Cube” is a short story by Nelson Bond. Set in the 50<sup>th</sup> century, it chronicles the discovery of a cube by Earth's future inhabitants. The cube is a tomb from the 25<sup>th</sup> century where great minds were placed during mankind's destruction from a chlorine cloud. As the cube is opened an electronically controlled speaker relays a message that includes information on awakening the humans inside. Shockingly, the reader learns in the last paragraph that the inhabitants of the 50<sup>th</sup> century are unable to hear the message because they are ants. This story can facilitate discussion on media and formats for effective

communication; illustrating how some are better suited for specific messages and audiences. (Standard 4, Indicator 3, Outcome a = Chooses a communication medium and format that best supports the purposes of the product or performance and the intended audience)

“The Censors” by Luisa Valenzuela presents the story of a man who writes a harmless letter then proceeds to worry the censorship office will discover a subversive message that results in harm to him and the letter’s recipient. To circumvent this act, he takes a job in the post office’s censorship division. The man becomes proficient in his responsibilities and quickly moves up the ranks to the highest section. He believes he has found his true mission when one day his letter reaches him. Devoted to his work, he censors the letter and the next morning is executed. This story provides a catalyst for discussion issues related to censorship and freedom of speech. (Standard 5, Indicator 1, Outcome c = Identifies and discusses issues related to censorship and freedom of speech)

### **Framing the Story**

After a link is made to *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, an introductory paragraph and questions need to be created to provide a framework for focusing the reader and facilitating discussion.

Questions should help draw the reader into the story by addressing specific characters and/or events in the story. For example, a question should not generally ask the benefit of consulting various sources, but specifically address the effect of a character relying on a single piece of information.

We attempt to compose questions that fit in one of three categories. The first category includes those questions that specifically address the *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards*. We use terminology and concepts directly from the Standards. The second set of questions addresses the benefit of being information literate or the hazard of being information illiterate. When writing this set of questions, it is useful to consider Harold Laswell's classic definition of *politics* as "who gets what when and how." Who benefits from information literacy? What do they get? When do they get it? How do they get it? Alternatively, who is harmed by information illiteracy? How are they harmed? Generally in each story a character is rewarded or suffers as the result of information literacy or illiteracy. The third group of questions addresses the rationale for information literacy. Here, we seek to answer why information literacy and lifelong learning are important. Specifically, focusing on the personal, social, and global implications.

There are multitudes of techniques for incorporating the short stories into discussions and activities. For one-shot sessions a short story can be distributed ahead of time and then serve as focal point for an introductory discussion. Electronic discussion lists can be utilized to aid student conversation. Stories can also act as a springboard for creative writing assignments. Students can rewrite the story with the opposite consequences; what happens if the character is information literate or vice versa. Students can also write their own brief fiction addressing a different standard. As Shapiro and Lie (2000, p. 768) suggest, literary skill and writing ability should not be the emphasis of these creative writing assignments.

## **Conclusion**

Technical skills alone are dry and dormant and hardly inspire the average student to acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for broad creative thinking and lifelong intellectual behaviors. Let us be clear: we are not advocating the elimination of technical skills from information literacy instruction. We are promoting the use of stories as a tool to introduce, accompany, and supplement tried and true information literacy teaching techniques. The compactness of short stories lends themselves to both short and long-term classes. Often, the power and emotional impact found in a short story offers a dramatic way to introduce students to deeper meanings about the value and need for information literacy than can be achieved in longer or more technical work. Finally, short stories invite students to engage in more active and informed discussion of their information seeking behavior and values. Casting these discussions in the framework of stories provides a degree of safety because discussion ostensibly focuses on story characters rather than a student's personal behavior. They also provide relevancy by providing a context for the reasons why one should be information literate and the consequences of being information illiterate.

## **Notes**

The authors are in the process of editing an anthology of short stories linked to the *ACRL Information Competency Standards of Higher Education*. This book will contain the stories, linked standards and discussion questions. Together they will provide a unique teaching tool for those interested in understanding information literacy through short stories.

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